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ABSTRACT

Three young adult novels published in 1983 or 1984 that are worthy of a place in the literature curriculum are discussed. These books have a special appeal to adolescents, deal with problems students might encounter growing up, expand their self-awareness and their experiences, and are teachable. They contain balanced, recognizable, and discernible themes, a challenging but not formidable vocabulary, and literary devices for discussion such as symbol, paradox, point of view, and style. The first book is "The Sign of Beaver," by Elizabeth George Speare, the story of a young boy's survival alone and his relationship with the Indians in eighteenth century Maine. The second is "The Callender Papers," by Cynthia Voigt. This is a mystery suspense story about a young girl who is employed to sort through the Callender family papers and who discovers a suspicious death, a kidnapping, and an altered will. The final book is Robert Cormier's "The Bumblebee Flies Anyway," about a boy in an experimental hospital ward for terminally ill boys. While a fine book, it may pose problems for the public, and teachers will likely have to point out to students that the patients are in the facility willingly. However, dealing with the story's paradoxes and symbols will be a rewarding and uplifting challenge. (HTH)

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The Young Adult Novel in the Curriculum:
Three Books That Might Work

Dale S. Bailey

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The Young Adult Novel in the Curriculum:
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I would like to begin with these somewhat altered lines from Sheridan's play, The Rivals. Sir Anthony Absolute is speaking to Mrs. Malaprop: "Madam, a Young Adult Novel in a town is as an evergreen tree of diabolical knowledge! It blossoms through the year! And depend on it, Mrs. Malaprop, that they who are so fond of handling the leaves, will long for the fruit at last." Mrs. Malaprop, instead of speaking of allegories on the banks of the Nile, might well have responded, "Oh, Sir, your alligator marvelously well deprives my situation." Lydia Languish, you recall, has made a studied attempt to have herself courted as a heroine from one of the then-current romance novels: Sir Anthony's son has to pose as a low-pay ensign, must enter ungallantly through side windows, and stand shivering in the frosty garden at midnight.

Although Sir Anthony is actually complaining about the evils of the circulating library, from whose shelves Lydia has taken the books that feed her romantomania, the situation is a recognizable one in our own day. There is a new battle of the books, yet another flareup between the ancients and the moderns.

The moderns, in this case represented by the Young Adult Novels, have brought us a growth industry second only to the new wave of romances (Harlequin, Silhouette, Baby Silhouette, etc.). As you know, the YAN has generated critical articles; it has its own section in periodicals such as English Journal, Booklist, and the School Library Journal; a handful of PhD

dissertations; it boasts a periodical of its own, The ALAN Review, and holds a treasured place in state and national meetings such as this; it even has its own anti-Romance: Sheila Greenwald's It All Began With Jane Eyre, in which Fanny Dillman comes to grief when she tries to interpret family activities not only on the basis of books such as Jane Eyre and Pride and Prejudice (which she reads on her own), but also on the basis of the young adult novels her mother suggests; they have Judy Blume titles: It's OK If You Cry a Lot; For Keeps; Lord, Can I Call You Collect? and Life Goes On, I Suppose.

As I have mentioned, it has also generated its own controversy: should any of these so very popular books be permitted into the curriculum? Just because junk food has been allowed into the cafeteria, say some, is no reason to bring junk novels into the classroom. Others say that junk food and junk novels are misnomers, that some of the food is nourishing to the body and some of the novels are nourishing to the mind. I'm afraid I've seen too many high school students dump, untouched, Shakespeare, Eliot and Hemingway into a figurative garbage can, just as their nourishing creamed-spinach-on-toast is consigned to the real one. In this 20th century battle of the books, I tilt, therefore, toward the inclusion of some of the moderns into the curriculum.

With this in mind (to say nothing of my promise to the NCTE Conference Committee) I set out last fall to find five novels, all published in 1983 or 1984, that I could recommend to my colleagues as worthy of a place in the curriculum. I dutifully read whatever books my very cooperative regional librarian could provide.

I was too ambitious: I found not five, but three, although I will mention a fourth. You who try to keep up with these books know that I will

have missed some good ones (there should be time at the end for your suggestions).

I tried to let my judgment be guided by the standard rules: the book should have a special appeal for adolescents; it ought to deal with the problems that adolescents might confront as part of growing up; it should expand the students' awareness of themselves as human beings; and it should serve that most invaluable of all literary functions, to amplify and expand their experiences, to provide, as Margaret Edward has said, another "whole lifetime condensed to its meaningful moments, with all the dull, uneventful days left out."¹ I also required good writing; strong characterization, vivid description, accurate dialogue, a plot that would hold the reader's interest, a story that would entertain, with no gratuitous use of violence or profanity or taboo subjects.

Because it was to be used in the classroom, I also required that it be teachable--i.e., that it have balanced, recognizable and discussable themes, preferably interwoven; that its vocabulary be challenging but not formidable; and that it demonstrate some of the literary aspects we teachers are expected to notice, such as symbol, paradox, point of view, and style.

Let me report first on one book which I rejected. It is to be published, I am told, this very month and may already have appeared on those more enlightened shores of the east and west coasts. I think it will

¹Margaret A. Edward, The Fair Garden And The Swarm of Beast (Hawthorne Books, 1969), as found in Arizona English Bulletin, XVIII (April, 1976), p. 101.

be to the kids of the 80's what The Outsiders has been to the 70's. Called The Center Line, it was written by Joyce Sweeney and is the winner of Delacorte Press's first annual contest for new writers of young adult novels. Delacorte was kind enough to send me a galley proof to read. Their courtesy did not require that I be a shill for the book, but I am happy to mention it because I think they have a very lively property on their hands and I thought you might want to know about it from someone not engaged to write their advertising copy (which, I presume, will be fervent and extensive.)

The center line is the center line of the highways traveled by five boys from a disintegrating family after they decide to run away. Following the center line, they stop for a time in Muncie, Indiana; Dayton, Ohio; Grand Rapids, Michigan; and finally, in Daytona, Florida. It is indeed a picaresque novel, with clever, rowdy, nonconforming rogues moving from place to place and adventure to adventure. (The boys run away in their father's car when they conclude they can no longer tolerate the father's drunken brutalizing of the younger boys; the mother had died earlier in an auto accident.)

In Muncie, they put up at a hotel that those of you from Muncie may actually recognize (the wealth of detail in the book is one of its strongest features.) As to the story, I must confess that I had some trouble keeping the boys straight, but here is a rough sketch:

Mark, who is the baby, is fourteen and just learning to play the guitar. Like all his brothers, he is a quick study and soon is feigning blindness at a nearby shopping mall and making good money as a musician-beggar.

Rick, a year older, is sullen and mutinous; his violent streak and a growing dope habit are constant worries for the group.

Chris, the middle boy, while he finds himself attractive to homosexuals, uses his precocious heterosexuality to pick up three equally precocious high school girls (at breakfast . . . yet, and at Denny's . . . yet). For a time, the three oldest boys have no use for their hotel beds.

Steve, who acknowledges his sensitivity and hopes to become a painter, is beaten by a street gang. Once recovered, Steve meets Amy, an art instructor at Ball State. She takes him home as a model in exchange for art lessons; they eventually get involved in more intimate ways and, after an interlude of separation when the gang goes to Grand Rapids, they put aside their age disparity and marry. Steve is the first to leave the pack.

Shawn, the oldest, is bankrolling the trip by using the \$4000 he has put aside for tuition at Ohio State. He has problems born of the leadership role imposed on him and at the end, discovers that he may have inherited his father's abusive traits.

Mostly, this sketch covers only the Muncie stop. You can see what to expect in the rest of the novel. I saw little in this book that was inappropriate to the characters or their situation (though I rejected the book for the classroom because of that very fidelity to reality). The dialogue usually rings true, but I cannot see high school students being comfortable reading aloud in class, although I think they probably do so at slumber parties and beer busts. The Big-Four-Letter-F-Word is sprinkled throughout the book--but then so is a kind of running debate about Christianity versus Existentialism, with occasional citations to Sartre and No Exit. I'm not sure which will be more discomfiting. The boys are street-wise and know such things as the difference between grandtheft,

felony, and misdemeanor. One has been a hit-and-run driver. Shoplifting is as normal as any other kind of nose-thumbing of society. They are clearly those recognizable "gifted under-achievers" who are to be seen in every high school and in most classrooms.

Unless this book falls short of its publisher's expectations, it should be followed (once it has been made into what book-jacket puffery calls "a major motion picture") by a number of sequels to answer these questions: Will Steve and Amy find happiness and fulfillment in the art department at Ball State? Will Shawn learn to deal with his own violence? How soon will Rick find himself in prison or a de-toxification ward? Will Chris settle down to one girl after he has played such a large and willing field? Stay tuned. The book doesn't have an ending -- rather it just stops.

The Center Line will probably be successful and certainly controversial. I would not want to teach it in the classroom, but I might recommend it on a selective basis to young adults. Kids will have copies of it, I'm sure, but librarians will probably keep it on some special shelf in the school library, where parental permission is required. That reminds me of the story, the only one I have, of the pert little freshman girl who approached the librarian at a high school in my part of the world and asked for, let's say, Judy Blume's Forever. Forever is kept on such a reserved shelf in its library and parental permission is required to check it out. The librarian sized up the girl, noted her extreme youth and bright-eyed eagerness and remarked that she could not give the book to the girl unless she saw a note from her mother. The girl pursed her lips for a moment, then said, "I don't live with my mother. Can I bring you a note from my husband?"

Most of us have enjoyed Elizabeth George Speare's The Witch of Blackbird Pond; many have used it as an ancillary work in studying the Puritan period in American Literature. She has now written another work, this one useful for its historical context as well as for its clarification of values (has that term been supplanted by one more acceptable to the censors?) The book is The Sign of the Beaver, published by Houghton Mifflin, in 1983. The print is pleasantly large, the book has 135 pages and is episodic in format. I think of it as a boy's book but one that might well appeal to those students, male and female, whose level of ability precludes a reading of the other two I intend to mention.

The book, an initiation novel, is set in frontier Maine, 1768-69. Matt Hollowell is 12, going on 13. He and his father come to clear their holding; now the father must return to Quincy, Mass., to retrieve the rest of the family. Matt is left with those responsibilities which we admire in frontier lads: he has to finish chinking the cabin, to cut the winter wood, tend the corn, and keep a fire going. He is told to treat the Indians with the same respect he would give the minister back home. When a white stranger appears, one who has lived with--and off--the Indians, he obliges Matt's hospitality by stealing his gun; this is Matt's first lesson, for he comprehends that he must also treat itinerant whites with the same respect he would give the undesirables back home.

Matt tries to raid a bee tree to replace the store of molasses he loses when a bear trashes his cabin. Badly stung, he throws himself in the river and is fortuitously saved by two Indians, a chief and his grandson, Attean. Matt's education in survival skills begins. He is dosed with herbal medicines, learns to use the crutch the Indians fashion for him, and wears the mocassins they bring. The grandfather acknowledges that the

times are indeed changing and asks Matt to teach Attean the white man's language so that the tribe can accommodate itself to the new ways.

An early attempt at teaching the alphabet is abortive and Matt turns to the two books his father has left with him: Robinson Crusoe and the Bible. The Indian scoffs at Crusoe's need to supply himself from his wrecked ship--"Indian make all things he need." Another insight for Matt is learning that there is no word for master and slave in Attean's language and little notion of the master-slave relationship. So strongly does Attean react to the concept that Matt is forced to read ahead in order to delete any further mention of Friday's subservience. (He has already deleted all sermons and other dull, "churchy" stuff.) Attean teaches Matt how to trap rabbits and spear fish, to make and use the bow and arrow, and to track in the forest. The sign of the beaver marks the farthest limit of Attean's tribe; all Indians respect the sign. Matt is suddenly aware that the roles have reversed: he has become a grateful Friday, while Attean has become his Robinson Crusoe and benefactor.

Matt also learns that the Indian code respects the right of all things to life: that animals are to be slain only when needed for food and proper rites performed for the soul of the slaughtered animal. He comes to know that ownership of land is not a part of the Indian code. And there is this bit of Indian sexism: the chores he has to do are "squaw work."

When the two have finished his much-abridged version of Robinson Crusoe, they turn to Bible stories. When they read the story of Noah, Matt is dumbfounded to learn that Attean's tribe has its own flood story. How, he asks, could the Indians have learned about the flood? He finds himself seeing more of the other side of things when he visits the Indian Camp and

then hears that Attean's mother had been killed by a white scalp hunter and that Attean's father had never returned from his quest for revenge.

Their relationship permanently changes, however, not because of this new knowledge, but because the year has come for Attean to go on the Big Hunt and find his manitou, and because the tribe must then move on to its wintering grounds. A dog and a pair of snowshoes are Attean's parting gift to Matt; Matt responds by giving Attean his own greatest treasure, an heirloom watch.

Just as a second big snow is threatening to isolate the worried Matt for the winter, his father and the family turn up. News of additional settlers to come is small comfort to Matt, for he knows he will miss his Indian brothers.

Because the book is episodic, the reader need not have a long attention span. The themes are obvious but eminently discussable. (I take some personal pride in noting that I had selected this book before the Newbery Committee gave it an honorable mention for 1983.)

The second book might be considered a girl's book, though I hope boys will enjoy it too. Those kids who favor Wuthering Heights and Jane Eyre will be happy with this novel. It is The Callender Papers and is by Cynthia Voigt, winner of several Newbury honors, including the medal itself, last year, for Dacey's Song. The Callendar Paper was published by Atheneum in 1983 and has 214 pages.

It is a fine mystery-suspense story; however, I think most readers will guess the outcome well before they get through two-thirds of the book. Like the Greek tragedies, the work brings us enjoyment not in discovering the outcome, because we probably already know that, but in seeing how the suspense is maintained, how dramatic devices sharpen the focus, how the

characters deal with their dilemmas, and how the several facets of the story are manipulated, brought together, and made one. It is, therefore, a good work in which to watch for mood, foreshadowing, and dramatic irony, to say nothing of the elements of the Gothic, by which term the author herself describes the book in her dedication. It has a number of statements to make as well, among them several about the rights of women, another dealing with the artistic temperament, and several about the capriciousness of inherited genes.

The book centers about Jean Wainwright, "12 going on 13," who spends a summer sorting through twelve boxes of Callender family papers. Her employer, Daniel Thiel, is a native of Marlborough, but has made himself suspicious in the town for having been a "Hider" during the Civil War and by keeping a convicted thief as his housekeeper. He is a dark, brusque, impatient, cynical, secretive person, "a country man in appearance, but an artist by profession," as Jean tells us. He has every appearance of being a villain.

Balanced against this somewhat Heathcliffian figure is the disinherited outsider, Enoch Callender, the surviving male in the Callender line, who is proud but ineffective. He is as bright and open as Thiel is dark and brooding. Blue-eyed and golden-haired, he appears always in an unspotted white suit, frequently to be seen playing croquet with his three children and their mother, forming a tableau of a bygone age of luxury and leisure against the backdrop of the mansion shrouded in mystery and rumor. He is as reclusive in his own way as Thiel is in his. And as symbolic.

Connecting the two figures, apart from the fact that Thiel and Callender are brothers-in-law, is a mysterious though lovely glade sundered by a stream below a temperamental waterfall. Thiel has done a disturbing

picture of it, with something threatening lurking in the shadows of the trees. Callender knows the waterfall in other, carefully-revealed ways. Years ago, Thiel's wife (Enoch's sister) had been found drowned in the roiling water below the falls after one of the frequent storms had sent the river over its banks and made the falls into the frightening monster of sinister forces it still can be in bad weather.

Jean, sorting through the archives, learns much about the past generations of the Callender men and women, about an altered will, and about the aftermath of the drowning. From her confidant, Mac MacWilliams, a boy her own age, she learns of the suspicions of the town that Thiel's wife had not died accidentally and, more to the point, that the child which had survived its mother's untimely death, had been cared for by a bent, wild-eyed woman with a foreign accent, often seen about the hills gathering herbs. When nurse and child disappear one blustery night, hints of kidnapping are added to the rumors of murder.

There is more Gothic stuff: the altered will is also a lost will, there are sets of unidentified footprints, gravestones with enigmatic legends, hidden paths with hidden observers, a secret compartment to be forced open, and a terrifying nightmare for Jean following someone's deliberate attempt to poison her. It becomes clear to her that her own unwritten life has now become part of the Callender Papers.

Before turning away from this book, I should mention the character of Constance, Jean's Godmother, who runs a reputable, private academy for girls in Cambridge, Mass. Actually participating only at the beginning and at the end of the book, she nevertheless is present throughout its pages, acting as a voice of conscience to Jean and a reminder to her of her own abilities and aspirations. Constance is a model of a woman of independent

mind who is daring enough to pursue educational goals for herself and her students that are well ahead of her time.

My last selection should come as no surprise. It is Robert Cormier's The Bumblebee Flies Anyway, published by Pantheon Books. This novel should work well for those students of either sex who are ready to deal with paradox, with the question of appearance and reality, and with the values and functions of symbol and metaphor. It has 242 pages.

It is set in a medical facility where doctors and psychiatrists experiment on youngsters who, condemned to early deaths by terminal illnesses, have agreed to submit to experimentation.

Here are some things one might note and explore with a class. Nothing is quite what it seems. (Those who have read I am the Cheese know that Cormier is a master at this kind of deliberate deception.) Barney Snow is the central figure. His ward, set aside for these terminally ill boys, used to be a maternity ward when the facility had functioned as a regular hospital. Where babies were once nurtured into life, young adults now face their final moments. The complex, dedicated to restoring (reclaiming) disabled human beings, is next to an automobile junk yard, where old cars serve to renew cars still on the road. On the other side, as a constant reminder of everyone's mortality, lies a cemetery.

Barney Snow thinks he is a non-terminal patient, the one who is kept there as a standard against which the others, Mazzo, Allie Roon, and Billy the Kidney, may be measured. He is wrong. (So is the review from Booklist.) Barney gives names to the experiments and the experimenters: the Ice Age and Merchandise are euphemisms for treatments and drugs. Aftermath is his term for the effects which follow Merchandise. The Handyman is his term for the principal experimenter, Dr. Lakendorp.

Dr. Lakendorp also lives in a world of euphemism. In our own lives we know that doctors and dentists prefer to speak of discomfort rather than pain; Dr. Lakendrop speaks of subjects and compartments and projects and screens, of miscalculations and things gone amiss.

The Bumble Bee, to continue this exploration of things that are not what they seem, is the name Barney gives to the abandoned MG in the junk yard--itself a mock-up of a car and not a real car at all, and certainly not one intended to be driven. Yet Barney will "drive" it. Remember that the bumblebee, which aeronautical engineers have demonstrated scientifically to be incapable of flight, flies anyway.

Dr. Lakendorp's laboratory is a useful parallel to the mock car in the junk yard, for in the laboratory car, Barney will be given a screen of false memories to obliterate the too-vivid and too-devastating real ones he has of his parent's fatal accident. Dr. Lakendorp hopes to discover through the use of the laboratory car if memory can be selectively controlled; Barney, by transporting the mock MG piecemeal into the attic of hospital, will use it to give Mazzo a glorious exit from the world of pain.

Barney's pure affection for Cassie, Mazzo's twin sister, is contrasted with her understandably selfish personal concern that when Mazzo dies, something grim will happen to her--as has happened on earlier occasions when Mazzo has been hurt or injured in some way.

This is a fine, fine book, but it will probably have some problems with the public. Although the idea of such an experimental facility is reassuringly presented by Cormier, some readers will find the idea repugnant. Teachers will have to help, to note that the patients are willing patients, the work of great and significant human value. Readers will also have to learn to care for kids whose life is sustained by tubes

and wires and violently altered by medication. Cormier doesn't spare us any details, for instance, in describing the contrast between Mazzo, the once superb athlete with the healthy, beautiful body, and Mazzo, the perverse and antagonistic near-vegetable kept alive, until Barney pulls the plug, by an artificial life system. All readers will be pained to see Barney ravaged by his own disease at the book's close.

On the other hand, dealing with all the paradoxes and symbols is a challenge that is both rewarding and uplifting. The story, laminated like so many of Cormier's books, reveals itself slowly, as the peeling layers answer these recurring questions: What will happen to these kids? Will the experiments succeed? What is the true nature of the speeding car and the girl stepping off the curb that is part of Barney's recurrent nightmares? Will Barney make good on his promises: "I'll get you a phone, Billy." "I'll give you your last wild ride, Mazzo," he says. "You're always doing things for people," says Cassie. Will anyone do anything for Barney? Will the Bumble Bee fly? What will happen to Cassie when her brother dies?

Barney's concealed love for Cassie and the joy her visits bring him is almost as bright a writer's feat as is the flight of the bumblebee itself; both ^{are} masterpieces of carefully written narrative, something close to poetry.

The Sign of the Beaver, The Callender Papers and The Bumble Bee Flies Anyway are three that I'm happy to submit to my colleagues for their consideration.

I once concluded a talk about the Young Adult Novel in the Classroom by saying, "So, now you have a few Big Mac's, Super Chef's and other kinds

of all-meat patties, special sauces, pickles and sesame seed buns for your consideration."

Now, just moments before the phrase goes into a much-deserved oblivion, I can update my ending by saying, "Here's the beef!"